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A. L. Cummings.

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The English sparrow,

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TRANSACTIONS OF THE

TWENTIETH ANNUAL MEETING
OF THE
HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY
OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS,
HELD AT
KANKAKEE, JANUARY 11, 12, AND 13, 1887.

REPORTED BY E. W. GRAVES, RECORDING SECRETARY.





TUESDAY EVENING SESSION. - Jan 11/87

Meeting convened as per adjournment, and the following paper was read by F. I. Mann, the writer being absent:

THE ENGLISH SPARROW.

BY A. L. CUMMINGS.

It is apparent to every one that this distinguished visitor to American shores, whose coming was heralded by trumpets proclaiming him the great destroyer of insects, has now become the object of general distrust, if not of hatred. This is natural, perhaps, but is it just? The change is not in the sparrow, whose habits are unchanged except in matters necessary to his changed conditions and climate. The change is in those who, in gross ignorance of his habits of feeding and modes of life, imported a bird whose beak proclaims him above all else a seed-eater, to destroy insects which were defoliating and thus destroying the parks of our eastern cities. The experiment met with more success than its extravagance warranted, because the bird, new to its surroundings and unused to city life, finding none of the food appropriate for its use, was compelled to change its diet and eat insects for the time being, rather than starve. Thus the temporary success achieved led to high hopes for the future, which the future failed to realize.

But, like all foreigners who arrive on our shores, the sparrow soon began to get his bearings and adapt himself to his new home. He soon found the farming regions outside the cities contained his true food, and colonies were established every where all over the country, where seeds and grain furnished the natural food of the bird as before. Then began a howl of bucolic rage from all those subject to its depredations, in which, latterly, men of science have joined, in a manner more mild, it is true, but not therefore the less dangerous.

Extermination is threatened in village and hamlet, and farmers have ascertained that pot-pies of delicious fragrance and extreme toothsome-ness can be made from their slaughter. But, in spite of all this, the English sparrow has taken out his naturalization papers and come to stay. What to do with him is the only question left us to solve. In the re-action that has taken place since his first introduction he can hardly expect exact justice any more than that other execrated foreigner, the "Heathen Chinee," of both of whom it may be said that they deserve more civil treatment at our hands.

We even heard the sparrow accused of eating fruit buds and thus destroying the hope of harvest, but we presume this charge is abandoned, or, at least, is not being pressed, as we hear nothing of

it of late. Nor do we hear of its depredations on growing fruits, and may fairly presume that the real indictment against him contains but two counts, the first being the destruction of grain, and the second the driving away of song birds from their neighborhood. As to these charges I will relate my experience and observations of these birds for what it may be worth:

About five years since a small colony of English sparrows came to Galena from some neighboring city, presumably Dubuque, and found a home under the roof of the Illinois Central freight house. Not being disturbed, they raised their young, so that by the following winter they numbered fifty to sixty individuals and acquired the freedom of the city. They raided Main street every morning for food, which they found principally among the droppings of horses along that thoroughfare; and when disturbed by passing teams they were accustomed to perch along the telegraph wires overhead. They also frequented the grain warehouses to pick up scattered grain. They spent their leisure in different small groves in the city, one of their favorite resorts being the trees back of the custom house, where their merry chatter added much to the pleasures of a sunny winter day. It was expected that their presence would prevent the usual number of song birds from appearing the next Spring; but we had the usual number not only the next, but every subsequent year, notwithstanding the large increase in numbers of the sparrows which now hold possession of the principal streets in large flocks. We have on our premises, which are near the principal business streets, boxes for wrens and blue birds, and expected to see the sparrows fight for their possession, but such has not yet been attempted; every season these boxes are occupied by their old inhabitants, and the only fighting is done by these song birds for individual possession.

It is often suggested that we should find an example of mildness and peacefulness in the birds, but of all sanguinary wretches these are chief. One pair of wrens and one pair of blue birds are all that can be permitted to live on a city lot. If more than one pair attempt it there is a fight, which closes only in the flight or death of the weaker party. Often we see bitter fights between blue birds and wrens for the possession of some coveted spot, but as yet we have seen no sparrow engaged in any fight with other birds. In fact, they are seldom on the residence streets, except in autumn, when they are attracted by the seeds of the gardens and hillsides. They may be on their best behavior here, knowing that they came uninvited and exist by toleration.

No one expects them to eat insects, but like most seed-eaters they like an occasional change of diet, and go for a little grasshopper sauce. They are hearty and social in their habits, and would certainly be greatly missed if they were blotted out of existence.

Instead of the number of song birds diminishing in our city, it is a well-known fact that the number is increasing year by year, owing, doubtless, to the increase and growth of shade trees, which afford them shelter and protection.

It is useless to deny that the English sparrow is a constant depredator on grain and seeds, but we do not hear any complaint of his destruction of fruits. We have two extensive fruit farms and several vineyards in the vicinity, and if they were seriously injured by the sparrows we should hear of it. The farmers can afford to lose a little grain at the time of harvest for the immense destruction of weed seeds by these birds during autumn and winter. The influence of these birds on the crop of weeds of the succeeding season cannot be demonstrated, because what it would be without them is mere speculation. Neither can it be ascertained, with any certainty, what amount of grain they destroy, yet an observant man can estimate for himself the benefits and injuries, and the balance for or against these so-called pests. Yet we insist that with their absence much of the brightness of winter would be lost in this climate. Our voice is therefore raised against the indiscriminate slaughter of these birds, though we do not object to killing for use, as many find them toothsome game.

DISCUSSION.

Mr. Kellogg — What is to be done with the sparrow? is the question. As long as he remains in the cities I would be satisfied, but when he gets into the grain fields there will be a row. So far as I know, they have not yet troubled the fruit to any extent.

Mr. Cunningham — There is no bird worse than the robin to destroy fruit. It is a mistake about the sparrow being quiet and mild. I had a martin box, but the sparrows drove them and the blue birds away and took possession of it until I used a shot-gun on them. They do not disturb the fruit, but are a nuisance.

Mr. Minier — Except in pot-pie.

Mr. Kellogg — We look on them with suspicion.

Mr. Budd — I saw them in England, France and Germany. We have them on the college grounds at Ames, but have never seen them fighting. I look upon them as respectable birds, and would rather see them become numerous than the robins. I withhold judgment against them for further developments.

Mr. Minier — In 1876 I noticed some sparrows in the streets in Philadelphia, and asked some ladies how they liked them. They re-

plied that before their introduction they were obliged to carry umbrellas to keep off worms falling from the street trees. I am surprised to hear an objection made to the robin; consider him very valuable for destroying insects, and he earns a few cherries. Birds can do without humanity, but humanity cannot do without birds. I do not think that the sparrow will be of any advantage to us; at any rate he will bear watching. I would like this association to petition the legislature to pass a law against shooting birds, especially quails, as they are the only ones that will eat chintz bugs.

Mr. Kellogg — The robins eat three weeks for us, and we feed them the balance of the year.

The Treasurer's report was called for and read by Mr. Woodard, as follows:

L. WOODARD *in Account with the*
Horticultural Society of Northern Illinois:

AMOUNT RECEIVED.

Jan. 12, 1886..By balance in treasury.....	\$ 62.03
Jan. 12, 1886..From nineteen members.....	19.00
Mar. 6, 1886..Check from State Secretary.....	50.00
Feb. 22, 1886..To eleven membership fees.....	11.00

CASH PAID OUT.

Jan. 15, 1886..Paid T. P. Streeter, as per bill....	\$ 2.00
Jan. 15, 1886..Paid A. Bryant, per bill.....	3.50
Jan. 19, 1886..Paid D. W. Scott, per bill.....	3.15
Jan. 4, 1887..Paid E. W. Graves, per bill.....	8.00
Jan. 11, 1887..Paid for P. O. orders, P. O. notes, and express note.....	.19
Jan. 12, 1887..Postage to date for Treasurer....	1.00
Mar. 10, 1886..Exchange on check from State Sec- retary25
Jan. 11, 1887..By balance.....	123.94
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	\$142.03 \$142.03
Jan. 11, 1887..Cash on hand.....	123.94

Respectfully submitted,

L. WOODARD, *Treasurer.*

A motion to refer Treasurer's Report to the Executive Committee prevailed.

President Barnard now announced that we would take up the following paper, which was read by Mr. Bryant, Jr., the writer being absent:



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